

Story Time

Lying there quite still, we listened for his footsteps on the stairs. Excited now that promised late evening had arrived. It was ages before he came as James, Katie and I shuffled around the bed. Piling up our favourite comics and books. The ones each of us had saved for this precious time alone with our da.

Not remembering quite how this had come about or why our dad had made this date special. Being the oldest my mind began to think over the past few weeks.

Da was fond of a drink. Guinness in the pub was a favourite where he would chat with friends. Usually he was a moderate drinker arriving home before 10pm. But there were times , even days when he stretched those hours and the number of pints he supped. During those times mother and he would fall out. That was when she left his bed to sleep in the single one on the far side of that large room over the shop.

Ma never stopped pleading with him during those absent times. One time there was a fierce row.

Being unfortunate enough I was in the kitchen as their voices rose when suddenly he grabbed his mug of tea and flung it. As the tea spilled, the mug hit the picture of 'Our Lord,' mums prized holy framed photo of 'Christ.' Smashing it in smithereens. That was the 'last straw,' she said. She was leaving.

But she didn't actually leave our home or us. Maybe I think it was the time she left his bed. We heard him, at last, thundering up the stairs shouting, "I hope yees are all ready. And the bed is warm. For it's fierce cold this evening," he said entering the

room. The Smith's crisps with the wee bags of salt and the 'sun cap juice' spilled out over his arms on to the bottom of the bed.

Enhanced our giddiness and laughter.

As he took off his outer clothing leaving them lying on the floor, his favourite magazine fell out of the trouser pocket. Quickly lifting it aside, he deftly hid it under the pillow. 'The True Detective Magazine' of the late 50s joined the many others under the pillows. Now I guessed why we were having the children's story time session in that big comfortable bed.

Being the eldest of this bedtime story session, I already knew about those colourful English publications. Having read most of them, they were on my mind most of those darkened mornings when da and ma were already up and about. Slipping into the 'still warm' bed after they had opened the shop on those cold Saturdays. Those murder stories captivated me.

Guessing ma had talked over with da when she caught me leaning over a pile of them. Engrossed in those true murders in England. She wanted to deflect

from them with children's story time in that big warm expanse of bedding.

Remembering them talking about hiding something. "Put them away Arthur. Maybe in a box under the bed at the far end," mam said. Now I guessed that was about those paper stories and my obsession with the content.

Knowing I could work around their hiding place in the days to come or being more careful, I did wonder why there were fewer than usual under the pillow. As the crisps spilled out, the juice lids popped as we settled into

‘story time’. A time we hoped would happen again and again. The soft firm voice of da reading those ‘Ladybird stories.’ ‘The Amazing Tales Of The World’s Greatest Adventures,’ from the book. ‘Explorers,’ too soon had my younger siblings nodding off to sleep with the bed full of crisp bags and empty juice bottles. Hearing our big sister Noreen thudding up the stairs, she arrived in the room in a flurry. Lifting Katie and James off gently to their own beds, leaving da and I alone.

Looking back, I knew this was planned as da began to talk in a soft voice about those colourful

magazines and how I must not read them again. “They are for adults,” he announced. “Only stories. These things don’t happen here,” he added. “Anyway there’s some exaggeration in them. Not all true in many cases.

As we finish off more of the ‘exploring’ tales, I must have nodded off. The next morning waking up beside Noreen, I knew it would be easy to find those horror stories again. I would of course, be more careful and stealthier in my curiosity of why people murder others.

To this day, I have a perverse sense of enjoying and figuring out 'murder cases.' Usually I am right in knowing 'who done it' as I reminisce of those happy times in da's big soft bed. The feeling that he loved me more than the others will always remain. Story time embedded in my memory forever.